

Muslim Printing Before Gutenberg

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Gutenberg in the 15th century. Based on his work on original sources, he states that some of the early printed Arabic documents display quite sophisticated designs involving calligraphic headpieces, transverse lettering, geometric panels, roundels, and the use of colour. The author documents briefly this important discovery and concludes that "Muslims were practising the craft of printing for some five centuries before Gutenberg".

By [Geoffrey Roper](#)*



(http://www.MuslimHeritage.com/uploads/Geoffrey_Roper.JPG)

Figure 1: Dr Geoffrey Roper (Source (<http://www.khtt.net/person-578-en.html>)).

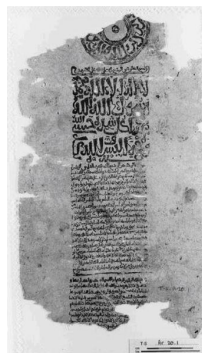
accumulation of knowledge, but was it really "invented" in 15th-century Europe?

Gutenberg does seem to have been the first to devise a printing press, but printing itself, that is, making multiple copies of a text by transferring it from one raised surface to other portable surfaces (especially paper) is much older. The Chinese were doing it as early as the 4th century, and the oldest dated printed text known to us is from 868: the *Diamond Sutra*, a Chinese translation of a Buddhist text now preserved in the British Library [1].

What is much less well known is that, little more than 100 years later, Arab Muslims were also printing texts, including passages from the Qur'an. They had already embraced the Chinese craft of paper making, developed it and adopted it widely in the Muslim lands [2]. This led to a major growth in the production of manuscript texts. But there was one kind of text which lent itself particularly to mass distribution: this was the private devotional collection of prayers, incantations, Qur'anic extracts and the "beautiful names" of God, for which there was a huge demand among Muslims, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. They were used especially as amulets, to be worn on the person, often rolled up and enclosed in

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The 15th-century German craftsman Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz is often credited with inventing the art and craft of printing. There is no doubt that this brought about a tremendous revolution in human communication and

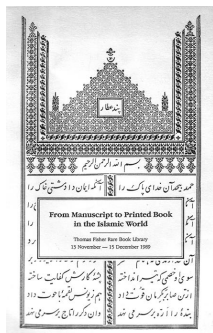


(http://www.MuslimHeritage.com/uploads/muslim_printing_Document_T-S_Ar_201.JPG)

Figure 2: Document T-S Ar 20.1. Copyright of Cambridge University Library (Source (<http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter/GF/42/#block>)).

a locket.

So in Fatimid Egypt, the technique was adopted of printing these texts on paper strips, and supplying them



(http://www.MuslimHeritage.com/uploads/From_manuscript_to_printed_book.JPG)

Figure 3: Front cover of the catalogue of the exhibition From manuscript to printed book in the Islamic world (Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, 1989).

derived from the Arabic *tarsh* (see below). But this is a highly speculative theory, and more evidence will be needed before it can be accepted.



(http://www.MuslimHeritage.com/uploads/muslim_printing_Document_M_2002_1_370.JPG)

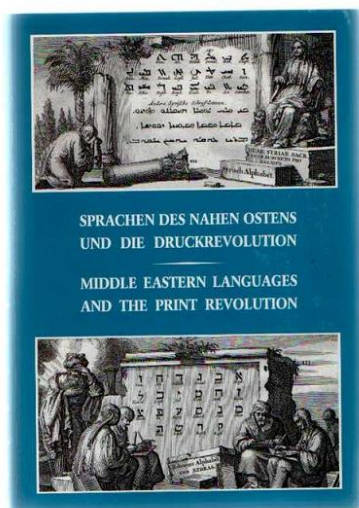
Figure 4: Arabic blockprint in the Madina Collection. Document M.2002.1.370. Los Angeles Museum of Art, The Madina Collection of Islamic Art, gift of Camilla Chandler Frost. Copyright of Los Angeles County Museum of Arts. Reproduced from Richard W. Bulliet, "Medieval Arabic tarsh: a forgotten chapter in the history of Arabic printing", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987), p. 437.

Some of these printed documents display quite sophisticated designs involving calligraphic headpieces, transverse lettering, geometric panels, roundels, and the use of colour. There is also a great variety of script styles.

Nearly 60 examples of these Arabic printed pieces survive in European and American libraries and museums, and an unknown number in Egypt itself. One example, in private hands, may have been produced in Afghanistan, or Iran, where it is known from historical sources that paper money was also printed in the Mongol period. There are very few historical or literary references, however, to the production of printed texts: only two allusions in Arabic poems of the 10th and 14th centuries to the use of *tarsh* to produce copies of amulets. It has been suggested that this non-classical Arabic term signified tin plates with engraved or repoussé lettering, from which printed impressions were made. But it is also possible that Chinese-style wood-blocks were used. The exact techniques are still in doubt.

What is not in doubt is that Muslims were practising the craft of printing for some five centuries before Gutenberg.

in multiple copies to meet the mass demand. Several have been found by archaeologists in the course of excavations at Fustat (old Cairo), and the archaeological context has made it possible to date them to the 10th century. Other examples have come from various sites in Egypt, where the dry climate has helped to preserve them. The style of Arabic script used varies between late Kufic and different cursive *naskh* and other styles used in the Mamluk period (13th-16th centuries). One good late example is printed on Italian watermarked paper of the 15th century. So Muslim printing continued for about 500 years. We do not know whether it may have influenced the eventual adoption of printing in Europe: there is no evidence, but the possibility cannot be ruled out, especially as the earliest European examples were block-prints. It has even been suggested that the Italian word *tarocchi*, meaning tarot cards (which were among the earliest block-printed artefacts in Europe), may have



(http://www.muslimheritage.com/uploads/Middle_Eastern_languages_print_revolution.JPG) (<http://www.muslimheritage.com/uploads/Enigma1>)

Figure 5: Front cover of Middle Eastern languages and the print revolution: a cross-cultural encounter (Sprachen des Nahen Ostens und die Druckrevolution: eine interkulturelle Begegnung.) Gutenberg Museum Mainz, Internationale Gutenberg-Gesellschaft. Westhofen 2002.

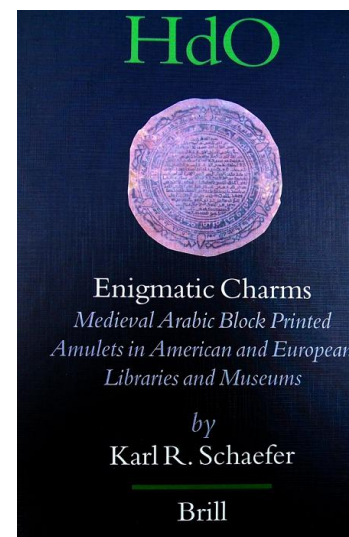


Figure 6: Front cover of Enigmatic charms: medieval Arabic block print and European libraries and museums by Karl Schaefer (Leiden Brill)

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Select list of publications by Dr Geoffrey Roper

- (With E.Hanebutt-Benz & D.Glaß, in collaboration with T.Smets): *Middle Eastern languages and the print revolution: a cross-cultural encounter = Sprachen des Nahen Ostens und die Druckrevolution: eine interkulturelle Begegnung*. Gutenberg Museum Mainz, Internationale Gutenberg-Gesellschaft. Westhofen 2002.
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End Notes

[1] See "Diamond Sutra (868) (<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/highlights/tour/diamond.html>)".

[2] See FSTC (10 January, 2003), "The Beginning of the Paper Industry (<http://www.muslimheritage.com/topics/default.cfm?articleID=329>)".

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